LIVER QI STAGNATION

Causes and therapeutic approaches

Reactions, behavior and conscious- or unconscious emotions linked with different symptoms of somatic conversion are made recognized in TCM in syndromes. One of the syndromes mostly seen in practice is Liver Qi stagnation, the cause of a lot of suffering. Liver Qi stagnation may have a negative influence on muscles, the chest, stomach and spleen, the skin, menstruation, hormonal balance, the eyes, the lower burner and may even cause other syndromes like 'Liver Yang ascending' and 'Liver Fire'. It is not the scope of this article to discuss all the different patterns but it will elaborate on the causes of Liver Qi stagnation and on possible therapeutic approaches.

The Shen, the organized consciousness, that uniform field of energy, attaches itself to the Jing of the parents and gives potential for the energy, form, structure and movement (as well physical as emotional). The Post - Heavenly Qi supports the link between the Jing of the child and the Shen (hence the importance of the quality of Liver Blood).

The original Shen (undifferentiated, impersonal without yin-yang) transforms itself in the Hun, in an individual person, in order to be able to enter the material. This Hun is personal and animated by the urge to live. The Hun is responsible for psychic life. Because the Hun is linked with the Liver, many problems of self expression are therefore associated with the Liver.

Because the main cause of Liver Qi stagnation is emotional, we will first draw a picture of normal emotional functioning of the Hun and the Liver. If we understand the normal functioning then we can see more clearly the disbalances in reactions and behavior in daily life.

The harmonious way

The Hun, the eternal soul in the Liver, is responsible for the movement from inside to outside. One wants to do good and wishes everyone to be happy. It is the connection with other people; it’s being part of a group without being dependant of it. It’s a feeling of: ‘I am here and I can be here like I am’ and I want to share this with a partner, a family, a society.

We see grace and flexibility of physical and emotional life (Qi flows). One feels good in oneself. Sexual energy can flow freely without guilt, hindrances, or fears. One is also able to give direction to his life with imagination and creativity. Communication is easy and open. Due to the openness towards the feelings of others the natural aggressive energy of the Liver is under control. Because of acceptance by others, one loves to share things. The feeling to belong to a family, good relations to friends etc., without dependency, results in a positive self esteem and identity.

What we see in practice

If you look around and feel underneath the fascia cuirass of your patients you will observe the lively picture of Liver Qi stagnation. The pattern can present itself under different forms, some patients will only have a few symptoms where other will be suffering under the burden of multiple symptoms and a complexity of emotional disturbances.

Mostly there is enough energy but this energy doesn’t flow, it slows down resulting in a feeling of tiredness. Sometimes this blocked energy releases itself and one sees suddenly the signs and symptoms of Liver Yang ascending or Liver Fire.

In general there is mostly ‘a traffic jam’, an indigestion: in times of tension and stress the stomach contracts as well as the diaphragm resulting in vomiting and nausea. Very often the pattern gets more complex and more symptoms and emotional aspects get involved. There may be symptoms like neck and shoulder tension with headache, tension in the abdomen, spasms in the intestines, TJM contraction, ‘plumpit’ feeling in the throat with gritting one’s teeth, a feeling of suffocation and a lot of sighing. Often there is no sexual experience and if there is, this is accompanied with a lot of frustration, with a bad feeling about one’s self or with a lot of hinder and fear. There is no real ‘letting go’. The person is stuck.

Those patients can’t ventilate normal anger; they are afraid to be assertive, they are very timid and never stand up for themselves. Their self esteem is low, they don’t venture in a relationship and always give in and take the
fault on themselves. They are unable to give a direction to their desires and very often remain stuck in a situation in which they find no issue. The fear for disapproval and rejection is intense. The fact that they go into a relationship to compensate the non-fulfilled needs of the Kidney sphere (like warmth, acceptance, security etc.) takes away their own strength. There exists a lack of power caused by the opposition between ‘this I want and desire’ and the restricted reality of not daring to choose for oneself. The lack of confidence will often lead to emotional outbursts, crying, a lot of sorrow and despair or the total conversion in the former mentioned physical symptoms.

Stagnation of Liver Qi is very often caused by doubt, not knowing what decisions to make. It’s like undergoing aggression and the way we can react to it is treefold. One fights back, runs away, or does nothing. One is like being paralised, being ‘stuck’.

The same with the Liver: if we know the directions of a decision, then the liver Qi backs it up and pushes it’s energy throughout the Gallbladder. But if there is doubt with a lot of fear then the Liver energy slows down and the Gallbladder sits like a blocking plug withholding every possible decision. Should we change our job or not, should we tolerate this yes or no, are we going to choose chemotherapy or not? Doubt blocks enormously the Liver Qi and that’s why we say in TCM that a decision is made by the Gallbladder because the plug of the Gallbladder is pushed away when the Liver really decides what to do.

Of course many persons have Liver qi stagnation in a milder way. Those who experience a temporary stagnation, not due to a stuck personality but mainly from stress caused by the responsibilities and time-limits at work. The muscle tension or stomach ache will go away with the relaxation of a good bath, a nice dinner, doing sports, etc. If more severe, a good massage, a few needles or some food supplement will be helpfull. If these persons suffered from lacking warmth and security in their childhood, they were strong enough to compensate it by their own means and are able to live their own life with satisfaction.

Some others have clearly Liver Qi stagnation but they are not aware of it and certainly have no tendency to change. These persons are rigid, very disciplined with stuck moral or religious convictions. They are seldom relaxed and are often responsible for the occurrence of real stuck Liver Qi in people that surround them.

In woman Liver Qi stagnation can be secondary to liver Blood deficiency. There are cases where the longtime stagnation causes the Qi to develop into excess Qi symptoms. Then we see impatience, rigidity, irritations about everything (traffic, work, relationships, etc.), anger, stubborness, fast changing moods, being hurt easily, etc. A herbal combination like Bupleurum & Dragon Bone Combination (ST) will help by calming down. But also learning these patients to become aware of their moment of ‘getting in excess’ and train them to let go instantly and to relativate things will help.

Having stated this, the fact remains that the really deep unhappy persons are the ones with strong emotional causes of liver Qi stagnation.

**Approach**

To be able to help these patients one needs a lot of different therapeutic tools and, very important, the patient must be ready and willing to change things. The process can take long, changes will be slow, so the inner strong urge to change must be there.

If you really want to dig deeply, and if the patient wants it, you can use the technics of ‘the inner child’, meditations, visualisations, etc. to reveal the patterns of suppression and the early causes. Somatic work, acupuncture and herbal therapies can always support such an approach.

What can we do if we don’t want to use more psychological technics? We can recommend the patients to learn Tai Qi. The fluidity of the movements with the circulation of the Qi and the solid grounding have a very good influence in liberating the stuck Qi and making the person more assertive. Everything that loosens up tension of the muscles and fascia is helpful: massage, faciatherapy, breathing excersises, dancing, shaking (especially in the pelvic area).

We won’t elaborate on diet but it’s obvious that a healthy liver generates more relaxed feelings and especially will not allow aggressive behavior and outbursts to come out so easily. Don’t forget the functions of the intestines: a ‘leaky gut’ will always intoxicate the liver. To detoxify the liver we can use tea of Taraxacum, Lycopodium, Chelidonium and stinging nettle. Taraxogen (WT) 3 x 1 tablet during 2 a 3 weeks will help a lot to detoxify, especially with stomach problems in the stagnation pattern. Taraxogen tablets can be
combined with Lotus Leaf tablets (SF): 3x3 tablets especially for people suffering from obesity and high cholesterol.

Make the patient to be aware of his emotions and encourage to ventilate them verbally. Only when anger makes Liver Yang to rush up is it advisable not to do so at that moment.

The grounding of the Kidney sphere can be very important when one has to make difficult decisions in order to choose for oneself. One has to understand that an harmonious functioning of the Liver depends primarily on the physical and emotional energetic sphere of the Kidneys. Total basic trust, security, warmth and acceptance in oneself has to be developed first (perfect parents can give that) before one can enter the Liver sphere to move from inside to outside without obstructive negative convictions. Because nobody has perfect parents it’s understandable that everybody carries consciously or mostly unconsciously some emotional lacunas influencing the normal functions of the Hun and Liver. Inner child technics traces the reason of the primary emotional reaction in order to understand why we, as adults, still react in a stagnated way.

The will to experience one’s own potential will defeat the fear for the emotional and practical consequences of the decisions one makes. So, before tackling the Liver Qi stagnation, it may be necessary to strengthen Kidney Yin or Yang to give a more solid grounding. This is especially the case for these patients who where always at the service of others, who got nothing back and who never sensed their own body needs. This situation produces sorrow, frustration and irritation while at the mean time the person remains highly active but with no real enthusiasm. A combination like Rehmannia 6 Formula can help here.

One gives Rehmannia 8 Formula for Kidney Yang in case there is no more life spirit to maintain this hyperactivity and when the desire to realize something is gone. Even without coldness (indication of Kidney Yang Xu) this formula can be given as long as there are no signs of heat or pressure in the head.

Sometimes the emotional suffering is so severe that strong agitation, restlessness and insomnia is developed. In this case we have to calm down first. Ardisia 16 (SF), a modification of Bupleurum and Dragon Bone Combination treats nervousness, insomnia, palpitations due to a stressful situation. It is certainly recommended when the patient is already taking medication to sleep or to calm down.

Fu shen 16 (SF) also a modification of Bupleurum and Dragon Bone Combination is indicated when the agitation is extremely severe. These people lose control about themselves and their emotional reactions are uncontrolled and impulsive. Together with this prescription one should use many other physical technics to calm down first.

When you encounter in the patient’s story that he has experienced, as a child or an adult, a frightful traumatic experience then advise to take Salvia/Amber tablets (SF) in order to calm down the agitation before tackling Liver stagnation.

When the patient is unable to think and concentrate clearly due to the stagnation caused by emotions, Acorus tablets (SF) is the indicated formula. It calms down the mind rather than the emotions. Similar action has Albizzia 9 (SF) but it’s indicated when the patient has hyperactivity due to the stress. These formulas are used in stead of, or together with the later on mentioned formulas, in case specific symptoms are present like extreme agitation with impulsive behaviour, no concentration, emotional trauma, hyperactivity and drugs.

In acupuncture it is important to know that the classical point prescription for Liver Qi stagnation will often be insufficient to do the job. The stagnation...
affects the whole body and especially the fascia. Look for spastic and tender spots. Some will be Trigger points. In every syndrome there will be muscle spasms withholding emotional trauma, but in Liver Qi stagnation this is especially the case. Therefore one should check the whole body for tension spots; often you will find them around the Gallbladder meridian (GB 30 - GB 20 area), the diaphragm, Long 1 and RenMo 17, the shoulders and scapula and the base of the skull. Ask the patient where he feels the tension. Release this points by finger pressure or with a fine needle. Many times emotional catharsis will take place.

**Herbal therapy**

Herbal medicine will assist and support the other techniques. Bupleurum & Cinnamon Combination (ST) with Pueraria added, can be used to help relieve the muscular tension and spinal rigidity.

Bupleurum and Tang Kuei Formula (ST) is one of the main formulas to soothe the Liver and regulate Qi. If the sensation of a throat obstruction (plumpit Qi) is present, one can initially give Pinellia and Magnolia Combination (ST) to regulate Qi and dissipate sputum. This is a formula that doesn’t treat the Liver stagnation directly but the symptoms of it: nausea, bloating, plumpit and it’s used for a short time.

Bupleurum and Tang Kuei formula (ST) soothes an overly rigid Liver and secondarily nourishes a weakened stomach and spleen. It can be used to relax an aggressive, moody pent-up rigid personality. It’s greatest effect is to clear the negative conditioned thoughts in order to open up the patient’s real personal self.

If there is heat (sense of explosiveness) add Moutan to cool the blood, Gardenia to calm irritability, Cyperus for the emotional agitation. In this way depression, chest discomfort, fullness in epigastric region, fatigue, menstrual cramping etc. are being treated.

Another formula to treat stagnant Qi is Bupleurum and Cyperus Combination (ST). It is useful especially when the person lacks the motivation and drive to make decisions in order to get on with his/her life. Bupleurum, Cyperus, Blue citrus and Peony relax the liver, Blue citrus and Cyperus make the Qi travel again. Tang kuei, Peony and Cnidium make the blood circulate because the blood has the tendency to become stagnant also. The reason to use Bupleurum and Cyperus combination is when the pain in muscles, chest, stomach area and abdominal spasms are stronger as in Bupleurum and Tang Kuei Combination. The patient suffocates under the stagnancy. Cyperus 18 (SF) can also be used in cases where the patient, besides the physical symptoms or stagnancy, experiences ner-vousness, anxiety attacks, restlessness and depressive emotions. This is due to the fact that he finds him in a situation without issue. Everything is blocked. Phlegm accumulation, that solidifies this pattern, is a secondary indication but not necessary to select this remedy.

Bupleurum 12 (SF) is related with Bupleurum and Chih shih formula (this formula brings the Qi to the surface of the limbs), Bupleurum & Tang Kuei formula and Bupleurum and Cinnamon Combination. The last formula is given for abdominal disorders but especially for muscles and joint pain in shoulders, neck and back due to liver stagnation. So Bupleurum 12 relaxes the liver but also the tension in the muscles. The indication for Bupleurum 12 is less neurotic as Cyperus 18.

Bupleurum S (SF) is mainly for abdominal aching and stomach distress due to Liver stagnancy. If stagnant Qi gives rise to fire symptoms in the digestive system a formula like Coptis/Evodia Tablets may be used.

In order to help a blocked, frustrated and timid individual to change himself in a free flowing person, the practitioner will have to use all his therapeutic skills and assist the patient in gradually changing the way he makes his decisions. Liver Qi stagnation will show itself in many ways; deep and cronic or temporary not devestating, but look and feel for it in every patient.

Product/formula references:

(SF) = SEVEN FORESTS products
(ST) = SUN TEN formulas
(WT) = WHITE TIGER products